MEMENTO MORI

Reflections on the Art of the Tableau

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I FIND MYSELF FASCINATED BY A CERTAIN TENDENCY IN STAGED tableaux such as dioramas and waxworks, one bound up in their commingling of stillness and motion. The diorama presents us with a hermetic, immobilized world; there is typically a painted background (often curved to give the illusion of boundlessness), and posed, lifeless figures (human or animal, wax or taxidermied) alongside the objects and ephemera we might imagine native to these environments. There is something profoundly fetishistic, and mildly necrophilic, at the heart of the diorama: an apparent desire to encapsulate and reanimate those items on display. This paradoxical tension between preservation and regeneration seems germane to the nineteenth-century imaginary in general, the moment at which many of the visual practices I will discuss came into being. But it is a tension that surfaces in many dioramas with a particularly powerful, and sometimes surprising, pedagogical bent.

A great deal has been written about the ways in which nineteenth-century museological practices relied upon novelty and spectacle, and the indeterminate realm between the desire to educate and the more profitable will to entertain. What I find most interesting about those displays that most fully conflate amusement and education, however, is their reliance on a highly specific, educational mission: a directive to recognize the self through an encounter with the unknown. This moment of reflection is often compelled by a confrontation with death.

I began thinking about these questions of stillness and reanimation while doing research on Victorian postmortem photography at the George Eastman House in Rochester. The Eastman House archives hold a huge collection of memorial daguerreotypes, keepsakes that took advantage of the emerging technology of photography to capture a fleeting image of a deceased loved one that could be treasured indefinitely.

When I made my appointment to visit the collection, the archivist suggested that I wear something black. I was at first taken aback by this advice, which resonated as both strangely intimate and formal, though his reasoning was entirely practical. Daguerreotypes are captured on iodized, silver-coated copper plates. They are singular, unique images—only one is created

Image above: Carl Akeley with a plaster mask impression taken from one of his gorilla specimens during an expedition to Africa, ca. 1921. Image ¢ 311654, Courtesy of the American Museum of Natural History Library.

Hand-tinted ambrotype of an unidentified child, ca. 1860. Collection of Jack and Beverly Wilgus.

per exposure—and they are highly reflective. Black clothing facilitates the best daguerreotype-viewing experience. Because these plates can only be seen when held at an angle, one must reflect oneself, or perhaps more accurately reflect the absence of oneself, into the mirrored image encased in one's hand.

While I had been anticipating that this research project would be challenging based on the content (many of the subjects were infants and children) I was in no way prepared for the affective experience of encountering these artifacts firsthand. Many of the images were framed in tiny velvet cases. As you tip the image back and forth in search of the best viewing angle, they begin to shimmer, fragile and specter-like, on the surface of the plate.

I was struck, too, by the range of visual approaches photographers took to this challenging task. Many of the images were straightforward and unflinching in their depiction

Image above: Southworth & Hawes, Post-mortem Daguerreotype of an unidentified girl, ca. 1850. Courtesy of George Eastman House, International Museum of Photography and Film.

of death. Others were almost breathtakingly beautiful; children lay in romantic repose, rosy cheeked, as if they had just drifted off to sleep. Representing perhaps the pinnacle of memorial artistry, studios like that of Southworth & Hawes engaged in acts of stunning photographic fabulation, using the deceased body to craft images of an idealized moment that might, in fact, never have existed in life.

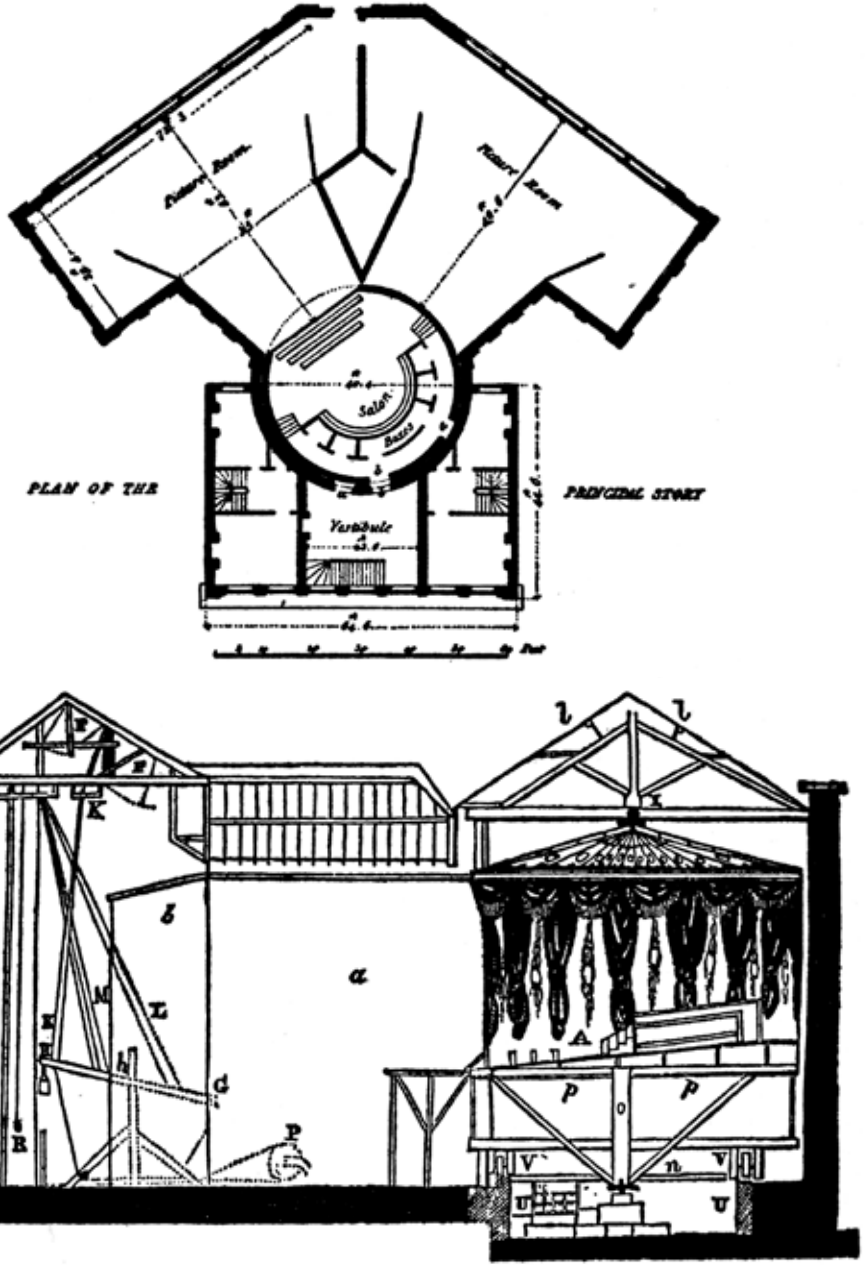
Viewing box after box of these images, I found a complementary affinity between the more "successful," well-produced images, and those that were more awkward, morbid, or ugly. Both types of images attempt to frame for the viewer a talisman that will help them to cope with their loss, and, simultaneously, to confront their own mortality. The French critic Jules Janin wrote about his first encounter with a daguerreotype in 1839:

> Dans ce miroir magique, la nature se reflècte dans toute sa vérité naïve et un peu triste. (In this magic mirror, nature is reflected in all its truth, naïve and a bit sad.)[1]

If there is a "truth" caught in the daguerreotype's magic mirror, it arises from the unresolved contradictions of its captured moments. In the postmortem photograph, we find the comfort of familiarity (intimate objects, fabrics, the interiors of a home, the face of a beloved) at the same time we are confronted by difference and the unknown (the inaccessibility of a lost moment caught on a silver surface, that same face rendered gaunt and strange). The looking glass of the image offers just a glimpse of this intangible, uncanny, parallel world.

The link between memorial photography and the diorama might appear oblique at first glance, yet the phenomena share a certain objective: to freeze, and to reanimate, a fragment of space and time.

[1] *Jules Janin, "M. Daguerre," L'Artiste 3 (2nd series), no. 11 (14 July 1839), 181–2. As quoted in R.D. Wood,* The Arrival of the Daguerreotype in New York *(New York: American Photographic Historical Society, 1994).*



Ground plan of the Louis Daguerre Diorama building, London, by A. Pugin and J. Morgan, 1823.

Louis Daguerre, who invented the daguerreotype in partnership with J.N. Niépce, also coined the term "diorama" to refer to the immensely popular entertainment format he developed and promoted prior to the premier of his photographic experiments. In a venture with architectural painter Charles Marie Bouton, Daguerre's dioramas involved large, darkened theaters in which audiences viewed a proscenium from a rotating platform. Viewers would watch landscapes painted onto a series of layered scrims; dramatic lighting effects would create the illusion of changing times of day or seasons, sometimes with accompanying sounds and real objects. Daguerre and Bouton's diorama premiered in Paris in 1822 to great critical and commercial acclaim, spawning several international, and later traveling, venues. Popular scenes included cathedrals, alpine villages, ruins, tombs, and, in 1833, a moonlit view of the murdered bodies of the Countess of Hartzfeld and her servant lying near their still-lit fire in the Black Forest.[2]

The term diorama, however, is more often associated with groupings of figures and objects within a stylized, scaled environment, displayed in a lit chamber, encased in glass. As Alison Griffiths has convincingly argued, museum habitat and life-group dioramas draw from the naturalistic painting styles used in panoramas or Daguerre-style moving dioramas, the staging of tableaux vivant and waxworks, and the ethnographic displays featured at the Crystal Palace in London.[3] These techniques were deployed in combination with the more modern, commercial display aesthetics of department stores, world's fairs, and advertising. Certainly the museum diorama's lineage extends to the seventeeth-century cabinet of curiosities, those treasure troves of objects and collected novelties, although the habitat display marks a significant departure from earlier groupings based on typology.

[2] *Helmut and Alison Gernsheim,* L.J.M. Daguerre: The History of the Diorama and the Daguerreotype, *Second ed. (New York: Dover, 1968), 32.*

[3] *Alison Griffiths,* Wondrous Difference: Cinema, Anthropology, and Turn-of-the-Century Visual Culture *(New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 3-45.*

With waxworks, habitat dioramas, and staged, historical displays gaining currency in dime museums and on midways, the newly established natural history museums of the late nineteenth century strove to differentiate their displays from the "hokum" peddled by less reputable purveyors. The museum diorama designers actively sought to achieve greater scientific accuracy while at the same time educating, and elevating, their urban audiences. In the introduction to *Windows on Nature: The Great Habitat Dioramas of the American Museum of Natural History*, Steven Christopher Quinn writes:

> It should be noted that, in 1868, one year before the founding of the American Museum... P.T. Barnum's entertaining American Museum in New York was completely destroyed in a fire. Barnum's museum, though it contained what was considered one of the finest natural history collections of its time, was anything but educational. New York was ready for a true museum of natural science without the show business and what Barnum called "humbug." [4]

To be certain, there is an educational component to the habitat dioramas, and an overarching mission at scientific museums that is distinct from that of the dime museum. Institutions like the American Museum of Natural History have successfully mobilized their dioramas to draw attention to issues of preservation and to generate research funding. But if the educational diorama is a fusion of art and science, as Quinn and others have argued, I'd like to suggest that this combination of approaches brings them closer to the modus operandi of all staged tableaux, including those of the "humbug" museum, than they might like to imagine.

A brief survey of minor examples from within and without the museum proper might shed light on the organizing logic of the diorama in general. The most stolidly instructive displays,

[4] *Stephen Christopher Quinn,* Windows on Nature: The Great Habitat Dioramas of the American Museum of Natural History *(New York: American Museum of Natural History / Abrams, 2006), 10.*

Image above: Model illustrating fly-borne diseases in screened and unscreened tenements. Photograph Kay C. Lenskjold, 1917. Image #36329. Courtesy of the American Museum of Natural History Library.

paradoxically, tend to highlight their ideological machinations most overtly. A 1917 diorama from the American Museum of American History, for example, was designed to educate audiences about the health benefits of window screens in urban environments. Yet the staging of the cross section of a tenement building clearly enacts a broader commentary about hygiene and class that has nothing to do with scientific data regarding the health risks posed by flies (following the logic of this rendering, the use of window screens allow one to hang picture frames with more precision). The decision to depict the need for health services via a scaled, doctor figure casts an ominous and paternalistic aura over the work, one that registers on an emotional rather than a rational register.

From the unabashed realm of entertainment, the dioramas featured in Lillie Santangelo's World in Wax Musee in Coney Island (in operation from 1926 through the mid-1980s) titillated audiences with effigies of important political figures and reenactments of freak births. Yet the Musee's most lurid and gripping dioramas restaged brutal murders and sex crimes as they unfolded. Santangelo described these displays as driven by a moral, educational mission:

> A wax show teaches the good things in life and also teaches that crime doesn't pay. What makes a person bad? What makes a clock tick, bad or good? [5]

Yet the lessons gleaned from the displays themselves are far more ambiguous. I'm particularly haunted by the image of Julio Ramirez Perez, captured in wax in the midst of strangling Mrs. Vera Lotito in 1948. Despite the passion of the crime, Perez's motionless figure seems lost in thought, his furrowed brow reflected in the mirror that forces him to contemplate his own countenance, as we contemplate him, suspended for all eternity.

In short, regardless of venue or point of origin, nearly all dioramas suggest an organizing moral or lesson. Yet these lessons are not necessarily what draw us to them, and they don't adequately describe what we learn, or what we remember.

Perhaps there is something about the mode of address of the diorama that warrants further consideration. Unlike peep-shows, stereoscopes, or other single-viewer, nineteenth-century attractions, dioramas and tableaux are visible to multiple audience members. Nevertheless, these displays seem to encourage the perception of an intimate, singular experience. Like immersive spectacles such as the Daguerre diorama or the panorama, the staged diorama works to interpolate the spectator into a world

Image above: Depiction of the 1948 murder of Mrs. Vera Lotito by Julio Ramirez Perez, Lillie Beatrice Santangelo's World of Wax Musée. Photograph Costa Mantis, 1981. Courtesy of the Coney Island Museum.

[5] Lillie Santangelo, unpublished interview with Dick Zigun, 1981. Coney Island Museum Archive.

that feels crafted just for them. We are encouraged to linger, to indulge in our appreciation of each carefully crafted detail. As with the daguerreotype, we are highly aware of the diorama as a unique, auratic object. It is a public staging of a private, revelatory encounter.

Donna Haraway describes the Akeley Hall of African Mammals at the American Museum of Natural History in similar terms:

> One begins in the threatening chaos of the industrial city, part of a horde, but here one will come to belong, to find substance. No matter how many people crowd the great hall, the experience is of individual communion with nature. This is... the moment of origin where nature and culture, private and public, profane and sacred meet—a moment of incarnation in the encounter of man and animal.[6]

For Haraway, this encounter is enabled by the careful staging of each tableaux and the narratives they put into motion. But there is one element over all others, she argues, that holds human viewers transfixed: the gaze of at least one animal in each display is positioned to capture and hold that of the viewer through the glass. It is a meeting of looks that could never take place in nature:

> This is a spiritual vision made possible only by their death and literal representation. Only then could the essence of their life be present. Only then could the hygiene of nature cure the sick vision of civilized man. Taxidermy fulfills the fatal desire to represent, to be whole; it is a politics of reproduction.[7]

The art of taxidermy, like that of photography, is a prophylactic against death and decay. Each format stakes a claim in science,

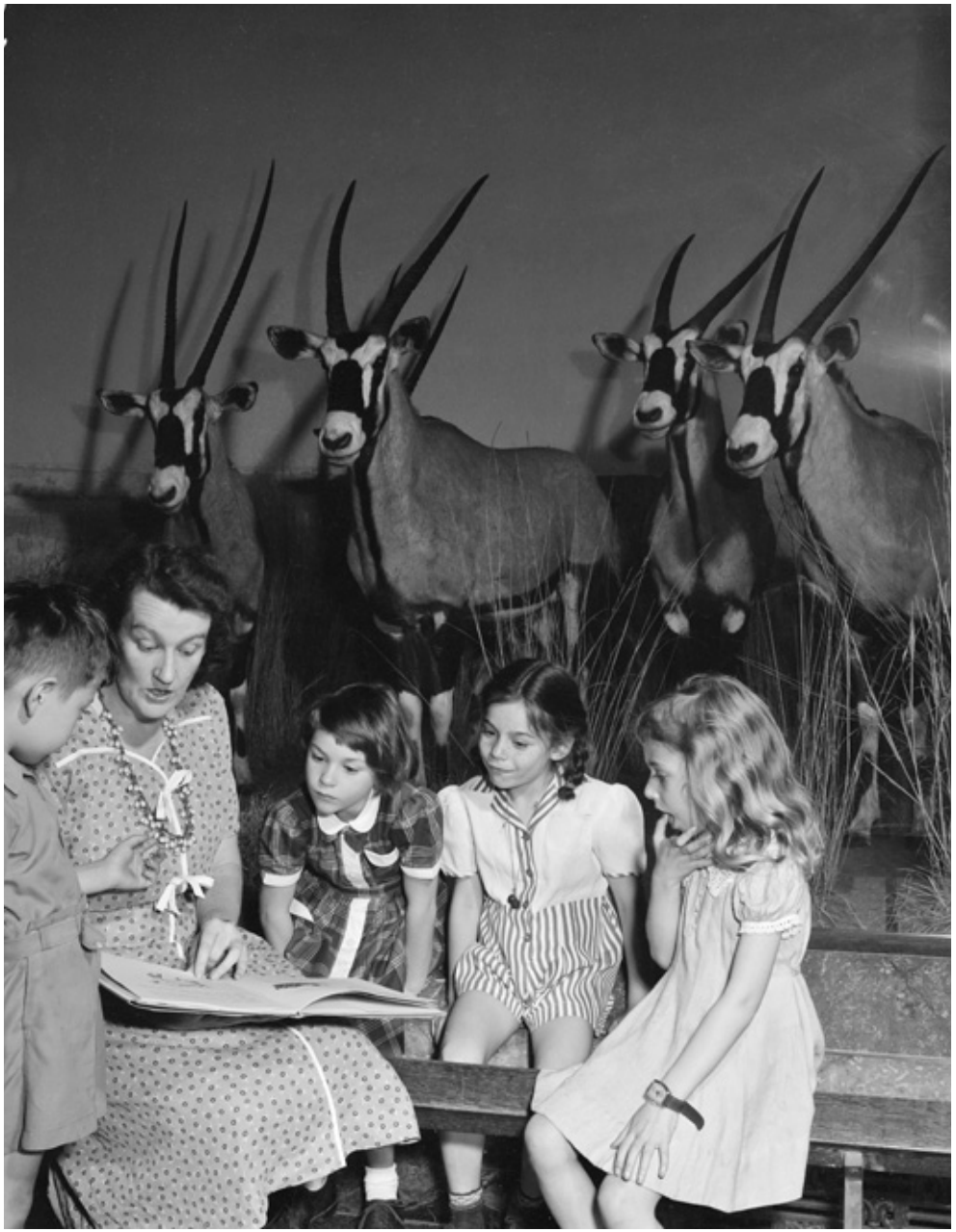
[6] *Donna Haraway, "Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908–1936," in* Social Text *11 (Winter 1984–85), 23.*

[7] *Ibid., 25.*

objectivity, and truth, forged via technology, colonialism, and the engines of capital. Each imagines a narrative, and each hails its viewers after the moment of capture has passed. Each is subject to the vision and fabrications of their creators, as well as to the accidental artifacts embalmed within their frames. And each is structured around the coincidence of multiple gazes: subject, viewer, artist. The resonances, and dissonances, between frozen and mobile looks creates a palpable tension, one in which the contemporary viewer is forced, however imperfectly, to see an image of herself reflected back.

Image above: Mountain Goats, Bernard Family Hall of North American Mammals. Image #46. Courtesy of the American Museum of Natural History Library.

There is an inevitable intrusion of anthropomorphism in the habitat dioramas. The idyllic family scenes in which groups of



Katherine Barry reading to children at story hour. Photograph Edward Laurence Bailey, 1944. Image #298163. Courtesy of the American Museum of Natural History Library.

animals graze in fields unmarked by human intervention are undermined when one recalls that the real scenes that might have inspired these displays were disrupted by the violent act of gathering the "specimens" that comprise these artificially assembled herds. As we become implicated in the politically and ethically fraught relay of projection and reflection at work here, the boundaries of the framed world are revealed as porous, reality as staged, and our own constructed worlds as both fragile and alien.

Indeed, taxidermied dioramas delve deep into the guts of the subjects they stage, but they often tell us less about the bodies that comprise them than those who labored in their creation. Habitat diorama creators historically obtained their raw materials by going into the field to "collect specimens"—i.e.

Above image: Akeley African Hall. Photograph A.J. Rota, R. Sisson, and L. Boltin, 1962. *Image #328663. Courtesy of the American Museum of Natural History Library.*

kill live animals, bring them back to the museum setting, and reinfuse their corpses with artificial life. As with the memorial photographs, a fascination with the materiality of death often coexists with a visual denial that the death ever occurred. This duality extends not only to the body depicted, but also to those of the producer and viewer. Carl Akeley's mountain gorilla diorama manifests this paradox directly, as the scene recreated marks the spot of Akeley's own grave on Mount Mikeno, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The habitat diorama and the memorial photograph serve as graphic incarnations of *memento mori*, driven by the same moral reminder: remember you must die.

The dioramas created for nineteenth-century natural history museums are housed within stately monuments to Western narratives of technological mastery and cultural superiority. Here the mission to educate and to direct the undisciplined gaze of the spectator often butts up against the pure sensuality of the display, and the distracted state of the audience as they meander through the galleries. Anthropologist Franz Boas, mindful of this danger, advised that ethnographic displays at the American Museum of Natural History avoid the "ghastly impression" left by attempts at complete realism: "since there is a line of demarcation between nature and plastic art, it is better to draw a line consciously than to try to hide it."[8] While Boas's motivation is surely quite different from my own, I find myself similarly drawn to those tableaux that most overtly celebrate their craft, or perhaps more accurately, those that flaunt their seams. What seems most useful to me in these circumstances is that the dioramas serve to highlight, rather than to resolve, the inherently fragmented and contradictory inclinations of their viewers.

Again, as with the postmortem daguerreotypes, I find a productive correspondence between "successful" and "failed"

[8] *As quoted in Griffiths,* Wondrous Difference, *24.*

artistic tableaux. The awkward drape of fur stretched across a poorly crafted armature, the decrepit snout of a deer head as it hangs, neglected, on its mount—these sad siblings of the carefully tended museum display remind us of the fragility of preserved corporeal remains. Taxidermists such as Walter Potter seemed to relish drawing a firm line of demarcation between nature and art. The spectacular anthropomorphism of Potter's scenes is staggering, both for its whimsy and its utter excessiveness. *The Rabbits' Village School*, for example, features forty-eight juvenile rabbits at their various lessons in a one-room schoolhouse, peeking at each other's slates or reciting verse. There is an element of perversity and exploitation at work here, yet in its self-acknowledgement as pure human fabrication, the anthropomorphic diorama may be more honest than the righteous rationalizations of scientifically legitimized displays.

Image above: Walter Potter's The Rabbit's Village School. Courtesy of Eroll Fuller.

Perhaps no artist has pushed the plastic potentials of the staged diorama further than Marcel Duchamp in his final work *Étant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau / 2° le gaz d'éclairage*.... Created in secret from 1946 to 1966, *Étant donnés* is viewed through a pair of peepholes bored in a rough wooden door. Peering inside, the viewer looks through a gaping hole in a brick wall to see a nude female form, reclining with her legs splayed on a bed of twigs, her head obscured from view, holding an illuminated gas lamp in her raised hand. The back wall of the tableau features a meticulously rendered landscape of hills and trees and what appears to be a flowing waterfall. The flickering of the gas lamp and the simulated water act as counterpoint to the motionless body. The skin of the female figure was crafted using animal skin parchment stretched over a substructure of putty, lead strips and various bracing elements (metal tubing, wood, steel-wire screen).[9] The effect of Duchamp's laborious process is strikingly fleshy, although the shape of the form itself is unnerving. The proportions and angles feel off-kilter, and the exposed, hairless genitals that comprise the focal point of the piece are grotesquely, ambiguously formed.

Étant donnés is inscrutable. It is a scene that begs for a narrative, yet refuses to supply one. The body on display titillates, transfixes, and disturbs; it readily exposes its most hidden recesses, but tells us nothing of its identity or status. Even questions of gender, ironically, are vexingly uncertain, given the indefinite sculpting of the form. Is this a figure in repose? A victim of a crime? The lines between life and death, wholeness and dismemberment are indeterminate. Of even greater complexity is the perspectival structure of the tableau, which contains a room within a room, and a posed figure who returns our gaze not with the glassy eyes of the upholstered beast (to channel Haraway), but with her centrally positioned genitalia, the organizing locus of the

[9] *Melissa S. Meighan, "A Technical Discussion of the Figure in Marcel Duchamp's* Étant donnés*" in Michael R. Taylor,* Marcel Duchamp: Étant donnés *(Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2009), 247.*

work. As Jean-François Lyotard famously suggested about this composition,

> In this type of organization, the viewpoint and the vanishing point are symmetrical. Thus if it is true that the latter is the vulva, this is the specular image of the peeping eyes; such that: when these think they're seeing the vulva, they see themselves. Con celui qui voit. He who sees is a cunt.[10]

It is a taunt that simultaneously foregrounds and inverts the whole history of Western visual culture.

Perhaps it is an already familiar truism that we see only ourselves reflected in the world of the diorama. We create the museum to erect monuments to ourselves. We flock to the midway and the movie theater to replay our primal collective anxieties. What I'd like to suggest is that we have much to learn from those tableaux that unsettle, disturb, and expose the operations of these viewing machines. We ought to pay attention to the uncanny dissonances of the failed or awkward waxwork, of the decayed or idiosyncratic habitat display. We should trace the resonances between these marginal incarnations and the strange, but often unquestioned aesthetics of our collective cultural mythology. It is here, in the space between past and present, margin and periphery, that we can begin to excavate the visual mechanics of our old master narratives, and, perhaps, to imagine for ourselves newly transformative miniature worlds.

[10] *Jean-François Lyotard,* Les TRANS-formateurs DUchamp *(Paris: Galilee, 1977), 137-38, as quoted in Kaja Silverman,* The Threshold of the Visible *(New York: Routledge, 1995), 172. Silverman notes that* "con" *("cunt") is also used as a chiding term for men in a manner roughly equivalent to "prick" in English, making Lyotard's phrasing sympathetically ambiguous. See also Taylor,* Marcel Duchamp: Étant donnés, *192.*